BRITISH COLUMBIA
The Best Place on Earth

ACHIEVEBC
BRINGING OUT THE BEST

# NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
2007EDU0001-000011
Jan. 10, 2007

Ministry of Education

## PRINCE GEORGE STRONGSTART EARLY LEARNING CENTRE OPENS

PRINCE GEORGE – Education Minister Shirley Bond today officially opened the new StrongStart early learning centre at Spruceland elementary school, which will help preschool children develop reading skills and prepare for kindergarten.

"We know that one in four B.C. children arrives at the kindergarten door without the skills they need to succeed. In Prince George, that means as many as 230 children are starting their first day of school at a disadvantage, and we need to change that," Bond told an audience of parents, preschoolers and school district officials. "This centre will give local preschool-age children access to first-rate early learning opportunities and help boost their confidence before they enter the classroom."

The Spruceland StrongStart centre will offer a free drop-in program for parents or caregivers and their children. Qualified early childhood educators will provide pre-literacy activities, including stories, music, art and puzzles to help children grow linguistically, physically and socially, and become comfortable in a school-like environment.

The Province will provide the centre with $50,000 to prepare underutilized space in Spruceland school and to cover the first year of operating costs, including staff, supplies and healthy snacks. The centre will receive another $30,000 for its second year of operation. An additional $10,000 will be provided for a thorough evaluation of the program. The first phase of the StrongStart program includes 16 sites around B.C., for a total government investment of $1.4 million.

"This investment will create opportunities for parents and caregivers to learn about activities they can do at home to get their child hooked on learning and reading," said John Rustad, MLA for Prince George-Omineca.

"Schools are the heart of our communities," said Prince George North MLA Pat Bell. "This centre will connect families with young children from across Prince George to learning opportunities that will create a more literate, vibrant community."

Schools throughout B.C. have excess space as a result of declining enrolment. Since 2001, enrolment has decreased by 42,500 students. Like the School Community Connections program that provides community access to existing underutilized school space, StrongStart centres turn the challenge of declining enrolment into an opportunity.

In addition to the site in the Prince George school district, StrongStart centres will be located in the Alberni, Burnaby, Chilliwack, Comox Valley, Coquitlam, Kamloops/Thompson, Mission, Okanagan Similkameen, Prince Rupert, Quesnel, Revelstoke and Surrey school districts.

-more-

StrongStart centres are a part of government's overall plan to improve literacy, and will build on the success of Ready, Set, Learn, a kindergarten readiness program. Over the last three years, the Province has provided $9 million to operate Ready, Set, Learn. Last year, the program was offered in 1,071 schools and served more than 17,000 preschoolers. StrongStart centres also complement the ActNow Literacy Education Activity and Play (LEAP BC) initiative that encourages literacy, physical activity and healthy eating in preschool-aged children – a $2.7-million program announced last month.

Future StrongStart centres are planned throughout British Columbia, fulfilling a 2005 election promise to use underutilized school spaces as centres to deliver early learning services. These new StrongStart centres fulfil a commitment made in the speech from the throne and are a part of the Ministry of Education's new mandate, which was expanded in 2005 to include early learning.

The Province is committed to reaching its goal of making B.C. the best-educated, most literate jurisdiction on the continent. The $1.4 million in funding for the StrongStart centres brings the Province's total investment in literacy to more than $60 million since 2001, including $12 million for public libraries, $1.4 million for adult literacy, $5 million for Literacy Now, and $10 million for textbooks.

-30-

Contact information for StrongStart centres can be found at:
www.bced.gov.bc.ca/literacy/early_learning/ss_centres.htm

Media contact: Corinna Filion
Public Affairs Bureau
Ministry of Education
250 356-5963

For more information on government services or to subscribe to the Province's news feeds using RSS, visit the Province's website at www.gov.bc.ca.